

The South China Sea conundrum in international relations

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Avoiding another war on the scale of the first two world wars became the most dominant theme of the international system from the 1940s onwards. As countries focused on strengthening themselves to prevent their respective sovereign existences from being threatened, it was soon realized that trade and finance can no longer be regarded as indices of soft power. Trade, investments and finance can actually empower countries in big ways, which can then feed into furthering military security as well. While the focus on economics as an important facet of power grew, the hopes were that through the interdependences created through foreign trade and investments, military aggression and conflicts in turn could be avoided. However, owing to the selfish nature of countries, the realm of economics also soon turned into a realm that saw frequent conflicts. In this context, the example of China's claims in the South China Sea (SCS) become important.



Chinese structures are pictured in Subi Reef in South China Sea.(Reuters File Photo)

China stakes sovereignty claims over land parcels and their adjacent waters in the South China Sea, angering competing claimants like the Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. The other claimants besides China, also have staked claims in various zones in the sea- such as those of the Paracels and the Spratly. The only differences in the claims made by China on one hand, and all the other claimants on the other is that China has tried to back its expansive claims with island building and naval patrols in the disputed waters. The United States (US) -the current leader of the existing system, which is not a claimant in

the dispute in the SCS, states that it does not take sides in the disputes but has often sent planes and military ships near the disputed islands in 'freedom of navigation' operations. Similarly, Japan, which does not have a direct stake in the SCS also provides military equipment and ships to claimant States like the Philippines and Vietnam. The absence of aggression and an ensuing stable order in the region is of paramount importance for both the US and Japan for varied reasons.

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In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favour of the Philippines, and in its judgment, it stated that China's claims of historic rights within what Beijing calls the nine-dash line and uses to demarcate its claims in the SCS are without legal foundation. The Court also concluded that China's activities within Philippines' two hundred nautical miles' exclusive economic zones (EEZs), such as illegal fishing and environmentally disastrous construction of artificial islands, infringes on Manila's sovereign rights! China responded angrily to the ruling by stating that neither does it acknowledge the ruling, nor does it accept it. While China is a signatory to the treaty, which established the tribunal, it refused to accept the court's authority.


Despite the ruling, China continued its spree of construction of artificial islands in disputed waters. In 2022, satellite imagery revealed that there was a land formation at Eldad Reef in the Spratley Islands, in addition to underway constructions of Chinese artificial islands in Lankiam Cay of Panata Island, Whitseun Reef of Julian Felipe Reef and at Sandy Cay. In December last year, Philippines stated that it was seriously concerned over China's reclamation activities in the SCS. In September this year, China installed a barricade near the Scarborough Shoal. If the construction spree from China was not enough, this year in September, China released a map in which, instead of the nine-dash line, it showed a ten-dash line- an extended version of the previous nine dash line, which already covers 90% of the SCS. The move set off a wave of protests from China's neighbours, which saw the new map as an attempt to extend Beijing's claims over parts of their exclusive economic zones in the SCS. Clearly, international laws are not adequate to contain China's aggression. But to understand why China stakes claims to the disputed waters, it is pertinent to understand the economic importance of the region.

The region, rich in fishing and mineral resources has an estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. As countries' industrialisation processes started adopting more vigour in the 1970s, countries needed more resources to fuel their industrialisation which coincided with the various claims made in the SCS. This year, in June alone, 48 illegal Chinese fishing vessels were sighted by the Armed Forces of the Philippines- just exemplifying how vast are the fishing resources that exist in the disputed waters. China consumes 65 million tonnes of fish per year. In addition to fish resources, China needs ever increasing amounts of oil and minerals to continue its economic rise, owing to which it has garnered its political and diplomatic clout in international affairs. Clearly

economics as a tool alone cannot ensure a more peaceful world order, given the fact that economics is also just another excuse for further conflict seeking behaviour- as exemplified by China in the SCS conundrum.

However, aggressive political, military and diplomatic behaviour can also foster cooperation and an example of this is seen in the maritime initiative of Quad countries announced last year. The Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness of Quad aims to combat China in its expansionist ambitions in the South and East China Sea, where Beijing's fishing practices have long been called out. While no names were taken at the announcement of the initiative, the target is not difficult to understand, given the ever-increasing concerns over questions of sovereignty and economic tights in the disputed waters of the SCS. While economics may not have fared in curtailing conflict seeking behaviour, it is time to rethink cooperation among states through an amalgamation of economics and politics as seen in the ever-increasing synergies between the countries of the Indo-Pacific to tackle China's heightened aggression.

This article is authored by Sriparna Pathak, associate professor, Chinese Studies and International Relations, Jindal School of International Affairs, OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat

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